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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER DECRIES BIASED OPINION POLL,
MEDIA COVERAGE IN RUN-UP TO PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Presidential candidate Artur Bagdasaryan invited the Charge to lunch to voice his deepening concerns about the upcoming presidential election. He complained that overwhelmingly biased media coverage, the combination of expensive air time and campaign spending limits, and "black PR" by the authorities were hamstringing his campaign. He also lamented that the authorities were abusively misusing the national opinion poll commissioned by the Mission to unfairly buoy the campaign of Prime Minister (and front-runner) Serzh Sargsyan. He claimed that if the election did not go to two rounds it would mean the results will have been falsified. End summary.

THE POLL

¶2. (C) Presidential candidate Artur Bagdasaryan (leader of the Rule of Law party and former Speaker of the National Assembly) invited the Charge and poloff to lunch at his party's headquarters December 26, where he and his deputy expressed concern about a number of issues related to the election process. Foremost on his mind were the results and methodology of the recently released national opinion poll funded by USAID and commissioned by IRI, which he says was not objective and was being unfairly used by the government to strengthen the Prime Minister's presidential campaign. (Note: IRI's standard practice is to share the results with political parties and presidential candidates, and to release more general, issue-related information to the public. The latest poll, taken in early December, was the seventh such poll conducted since May, 2006, and one more is planned in mid-January, 2008. End note.)

¶3. (C) Challenging the poll's methodology and accuracy, Bagdasaryan insisted that 60 percent of the Armenians who participate in the poll are not being candid because the interviews take place in their homes) usually an apartment building, where police or someone else with ties to the authorities is likely to learn of the pollster's visit and make sure the answers were "correct." He proposed that Gallup conduct anonymous, "random" surveys in cafes, restaurants and in the streets to address this issue. (Note: While the seven surveys so far have consistently shown Bagdasaryan running second, he is far behind the front-runner, Prime Minister Sargsyan. End note.)

14. (C) Bagdasaryan also complained about Gallup's partner in Armenia, the Armenian Sociological Association (ASA), which he insisted is pro-Government (the GOAM says it is pro-opposition). He asked that the Embassy join him in requesting Gallup to use only foreign personnel in the upcoming opinion poll, as he said ASA's pollsters could not be trusted. He then offered to finance the logistical expenses for bringing the foreign pollsters to Armenia. Asked how the polls' accuracy could be questioned when all seven over the last 19 months have consistently shown the same results, Bagdasaryan and his deputy Mher Shahgeldian said ASA was falsifying the data it collected. (Note: The poll has been conducted quarterly, with the same questions, and given each time to different sets of 1,200 respondents over age 18. It has a margin of error of three percent. End note.)

OTHER POLITICAL LEADERS ON POLL (

15. (U) Bagdasaryan's criticism was preceded earlier in the week by ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) and Dashnak presidential candidate Vahan Hovanissian. Both publicly voiced criticism of the poll's results, calling them fraudulent given their collection by pollsters from ASA. Ter-Petrossian impugned ASA's data, charging that it always coincided with official results of past elections that were subsequently criticized by the international community. On December 27, the third major opposition presidential candidate, Vazgen Manukian of the National Democratic Union party, also criticized the poll at a press conference, saying "nobody in Armenia has ever had trust in opinion polls." Manukian also hotly disputed the 30 percent figure the most

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recent poll ascribed to front-runner Sargsyan, insisting his popularity was not that high.

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(AND THE PRIME MINISTER'S TAKE ON POLL RESULTS

16. (C) Not surprisingly, front-runner Serzh Sargsyan has defended the results of the recent poll, and the polling process itself. The Prime Minister said the polls were important because they allowed people an opportunity to express themselves, influence the direction of government work, and provide guidance on social issues. Acerbically responding to the presidential candidates who have called the polls fraudulent, Sargsyan said "My opponents can tell fairy tales that I bribed the polling centers (but this would not affect the correct science that deals with public opinion polls." (Note: Prior to the release of the latest poll results, Sargsyan publicly supported the holding of an exit poll on election day, after we broached the idea with him directly. End note.)

MEDIA FREEDOM AND "BLACK PR"

17. (C) Bagdasaryan and his deputy Shahgeldian also decried the "unprecedented" media situation in the country, claiming it was severely hamstringing Bagdasaryan's presidential campaign. Shahgeldian said his boss had been interviewed on TV only five times since the May parliamentary elections, and himself and another key party deputy only three times in the same time period. He also said the media ignored Bagdasaryan's December 11 meeting with European ambassadors.

18. (C) Bagdasaryan said another real problem for his campaign would be the combination of rising prices for paid airtime and the campaign spending cap of 70 million drams (approximately USD 23,300). He charged that that sum alone

would mean he could afford only six minutes of daily spots on only three of the country's 17 major channels throughout the election campaign. (Note: All presidential candidates will be provided with free airtime on public media as well, though precise figures have not yet been released. Not yet confirmed, the price per minute of paid airtime quoted by Bagdasaryan is USD 500. End note.)

¶9. (C) Bagdasaryan urged the Embassy to speak out more strongly on the issue of media freedom, citing monitoring statistics he claimed show a strong bias for the PM. He alleged that Prime Minister Sargsyan had been shown 10,000 times in the past eight months while his two party deputies had been shown only three times. He compared with this the coverage of allies of the authorities, who had been shown 200 times in the same period. He added that regional TV stations outside of Yerevan had inexplicably refused to air paid political advertisements before the election, and that additional unspecified "administrative pressure" was being exerted on behalf of the PM's campaign. His deputy complained of "black PR," where TV channels were showing video footage of opposition candidates without airing the accompanying audio. Instead, he said channels were using their own editorial voice-over to mischaracterize what the candidates were saying.

ELECTION PREDICTIONS

¶10. (C) Queried on possible election scenarios, Bagdasaryan predicted that the election will go to a second round. He said "if it doesn't, that means the results were falsified." When prodded, Bagdasaryan confirmed that he would support ex-President Ter-Petrosian if it came down to Ter-Petrosian and PM Sargsyan in the second round. He also assured us that Ter-Petrosian would support his candidacy if it was he who advanced to the second round.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Bagdasaryan's complaints about the media environment point to a real problem area for him and the rest of the opposition, and are a telltale sign that the presidential campaign is heating up. The imbalance in media coverage cited by Bagdasaryan has been noted publicly as an area of

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concern by both the Embassy and the OSCE. His protests regarding the IRI poll strike us as less serious, especially when he claimed that his own "independent" polling data show him beating the PM by about 10 percentage points. Reactions to the poll have been somewhat surprising, especially from opposition candidates who normally characterize election assistance from the international community as a good thing. Critiques aside, the fact that the poll has focused society's attention on the important electoral process underway prove its value as an effective awareness-building mechanism to address voter apathy. End comment.

PENNINGTON